

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

## DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Faculty Publications, Department of Psychology

Psychology, Department of

---

9-2008

### Punishing My Parents: Juveniles' Perspectives on Parental Responsibility

Eve M. Brank

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*, [ebrank2@unl.edu](mailto:ebrank2@unl.edu)

Jodi Lane

*University of Florida*, [jlane@crim.ufl.edu](mailto:jlane@crim.ufl.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/psychfacpub>



Part of the [Psychiatry and Psychology Commons](#)

---

Brank, Eve M. and Lane, Jodi, "Punishing My Parents: Juveniles' Perspectives on Parental Responsibility" (2008). *Faculty Publications, Department of Psychology*. 386.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/psychfacpub/386>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Psychology, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications, Department of Psychology by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

## Punishing My Parents: Juveniles' Perspectives on Parental Responsibility

Eve M. Brank ([ebrank2@unl.edu](mailto:ebrank2@unl.edu)), Jodi Lane  
University of Florida

### Abstract

Interviews of 147 juveniles in postadjudication residential facilities revealed that the juveniles generally did not believe their parents were responsible for the illegal activities of the juvenile. A vast majority of juveniles said that their parents were not responsible at all and also said that if they had known that their parents would also be punished for their crimes, they would have been less likely to commit the crimes. No patterns emerged for these questions based on the demographic or social characteristics of the juveniles. Implications of the juveniles' perspective are considered, focusing particularly on the juveniles' lack of willingness to place accountability on their parents.

**Keywords:** parental responsibility; juveniles; interviews

**Authors' Note:** The authors would like to thank Carrie Schrage, Jessica Perry, Gretchen Pendell, and Ashley Kolnes for their work on this project. We would also like to thank members of the Faith and Community-Based Delinquency Treatment Initiative and the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice for their cooperation and participation in the research. The opinions expressed here are solely those of the authors' and do not necessarily represent the positions of the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice or the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

In a little more than a hundred years, the juvenile justice system has largely transformed from the original *parens patriae* notions into a system based on blame, responsibility, and accountability. In the same states where legislators once called the wayward youth to be brought back into the folds of society, they now call for determinate sentencing and enhanced penalties when youth break the law. Clearly, the law places legal accountability on juveniles, but the law has also placed increasingly more accountability on the parents of those children (Brank, Kucera, & Hays, 2005; Harris, 2006).

Based on state legislation and city council attention to the topic of parental responsibility laws, it is clear that lawmakers support accountability for parents whose children commit delinquent acts. The public's support of this accountability appears to be present, but possibly less intense than anecdotal media stories portray (Brank & Weisz, 2004; Brank, Hays, & Weisz, 2006).

The current research reports the findings from an exploratory study in Flor-

ida involving face-to-face interviews with youthful offenders housed in moderate and high-risk postadjudication facilities and participating in the Florida faith and community-based delinquency treatment initiative (FCBDTI). In particular, these analyses explore juveniles' attitudes toward parental responsibility generally as well as youths' perceptions of their own parents' responsibility for their personal delinquency and subsequent dispositions.

### **Parental Responsibility Laws**

Although not a new concept, holding parents accountable for the crimes their children commit has gained attention in recent years as the media and legislators are focusing more attention on parental responsibility laws. These laws generally come in three different forms at the state level: civil liability, contributing to the delinquency of a minor, and parental involvement (Brank et al., 2005). The third type is the newest and most controversial. For example, in Florida, the site of the current research, parents can be required to attend parenting classes or counseling when it is deemed necessary for the rehabilitation of the child or to aid the parents in their abilities to raise the child (Powers With Respect to Certain Children, 2007). Among other things, the court has the discretion to order the parents to perform community service or make restitution if the parents did not make a "diligent and good faith effort" to prevent the delinquency (Powers of the Court Over Parent or Guardian at Disposition, 2007). Currently, no cases have addressed this statutory terminology that makes it difficult to know exactly what parental actions the courts will consider as diligent and in good faith. City ordinances reflecting this third type of law require parents to participate in community service or pay fines when their children break laws such as city curfews (see, Jacksonville City Ordinance, 2006). Although none of these forms of law is particularly new, they often gain public attention after a major youth crime, like a school shooting or gang violence. Despite the media attention after a major crime, some evidence suggests that the laws are used rather infrequently (Harris, 2006).

Legal scholars have mixed reactions to parental responsibility issues with many arguing that the laws are not legitimate exercises of the juvenile court power. Some scholars are especially critical and see parental responsibility laws as nothing more than symbolic politics and argue that they will only continue to perpetrate the disadvantage of single and minority mothers (Cahn, 1996; Laskin, 2000). Others contend that these notions are appropriate and based on the well-supported concept of parental monitoring (Davidson, 1995).

### **Parental Monitoring**

One of the foundations of parental responsibility laws seems to be the negative relationship between parental monitoring and juvenile delinquency (Browning & Loeber, 1999; Guo, Hawkins, Hill, & Abbott, 2001; Laird, Pettit, Bates, & Dodge, 2003; Patterson & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1984). Research has repeatedly

demonstrated that the children who participate in illegal behavior are more likely to come from homes where the parents are not actively involved in the juveniles' lives or have poor parent-child relationships (Simourd & Andrews, 1994). Less parent supervision is also related to a greater likelihood of having delinquent friends (Warr, 2005).

In addition to parental monitoring, open communication between juveniles and their parents is related to a decrease in delinquency (Caprar et al., 1998; Clark & Shields, 1997). Other parental behaviors such as hostility toward (Conger & Conger, 1994) or rejection of (Barnow, Lucht, & Freyberger, 2005) their children are related to increased rates of delinquency. Juveniles who are exposed to violence in their homes are also more likely to report delinquent behaviors (Smith & Thornberry, 1995; Thornberry, 1994; Widom, 1989; Zin-graff, Leiter, Myers, & Johnson, 1993). Clearly, research has demonstrated a connection between parental behaviors and a Juvenile's delinquency. The question remains whether appropriate parental behaviors can be enforced through parental responsibility legislation.

### **Parental Responsibility and Criminological Theory**

The legal focus on parental monitoring fits nicely within some tenets of criminological theory as well. Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) *A General Theory of Crime* argues that parents are the major problem that produces low self-control, the key factor in criminality according to the theory. These theorists argue that for children to be taught self-control, "the person who cares for the child will watch his behavior, see him doing things he should not do, and correct him" (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990, p. 97). From this perspective, parents might fail to care for the child at all, fail to monitor the child's behavior, fail to notice that behaviors are wrong, or fail to punish the child when problematic behaviors arise. Any of these failures could lead to low self-control in the child and possibly delinquency. In trying to improve parental monitoring and involvement among youths in the juvenile justice system, the laws are essentially attempting to force good parenting or at least prevent major failures in these key areas.

These laws also seem to be based on the tenets of deterrence theory, or the idea that the threat of punishing the parents will prevent youths from committing crimes (either indirectly through increased parental control or directly by affecting the juvenile's decision about whether or not to commit delinquency). Some studies on deterrence, but not all, have found that a person's perception of a higher risk of getting caught and punished is associated with less self-reported offending or expectations of offending (see Nagin, 1998, for a review). We know of no other studies examining the connection between youths' perceptions of negative consequences for others, such as parents, and individual deterrence effects. It is at least theoretically possible; however, that the more attached youths are to their parents, the more they would worry about the effects of their own behavior on them. This might be especially true if the families face financial hardship, regularly struggling to "make ends meet," and the threatened

punishment involves financial penalties for parents, as it does in Florida. In contrast, youths who are in trouble may have fewer bonds to their parents and therefore may be less likely to be deterred by legal threats of punishment.

### **Public Opinion on Juvenile Crime and Parental Responsibility Laws**

The public has taken a fairly punitive stance toward juvenile offenders even in light of the recent reductions in juvenile crime (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). The best interest standard originally envisioned for the juvenile justice system has given way to a system that holds juveniles accountable for their actions in a very similar way to the criminal justice system holds adults accountable for their crimes and readily transfers juveniles into the adult criminal justice system. The one caveat to the juvenile accountability model is the parental responsibility laws that remove some of the responsibility away from the juveniles and place it on the parents.

Because parental responsibility laws seem to run counter to the general juvenile accountability notions, early research in the area of parental responsibility mainly focused on public opinion concerning these laws. National polls indicated that many adults saw the parents as blameworthy for the Columbine school shootings (USA Today/CNN/Gallup Poll, 1999), although they also blamed television, movies, music, and social pressures. When asked more generally about parents' responsibility, nearly 70% of the respondents to a national Gallup Organization telephone poll indicated that the parents, in addition to the juvenile, were responsible when a teenager commits a crime (Brank & Weisz, 2004). Similarly, almost half of the 2,000 adults surveyed by Public Agenda Online (1999) thought that the difficulties facing kids today were the result of irresponsible parents. Some research has examined the public support on a deeper level by comparing global versus specific attitudes. Similar to other global and specific research (see Applegate, Cullen, Turner, & Sundt, 1996; Moon, Wright, Cullen, & Pealer, 2000) that demonstrates attitude inconsistency, people were more supportive of parental responsibility notions when they were asked generally rather than when asked about a case description of a specific juvenile offender and his parents (Brank et al., 2006).

### **Juvenile Perspectives**

Despite their unique perspective, it is fairly rare that juveniles are asked for their opinions regarding the juvenile justice system (Lane, Lanza-Kaduce, Frazier, & Bishop, 2002). Lane and her colleagues (2002) asked juveniles who were either in the juvenile justice system or had been transferred to the adult system about their experiences in their current and past correctional settings and asked them to indicate which setting was most beneficial to them. The juveniles' responses were introspective and did not just concentrate on the easiest type of commitment. The juveniles indicated that the deep-end (more intensive) juvenile commitments were more beneficial than the low-end juvenile commitments

or the adult sanctions. Specifically, the juveniles believed that learning educational and life skills in the programs was the most helpful in improving their behaviors.

Another notable exception is the recent work by Abrams (2006), in which juveniles were asked about their perspectives on two different residential treatment programs. This ethnographic small sample study found that some residents were poignantly cynical and noted "faking" the rehabilitation the programs required. In addition, a number of the juveniles sensed incongruence between the way they saw their lives and the way the staff in the treatment programs viewed them. For instance, one juvenile stated that the staff blamed his parents for his illegal behaviors, but he saw it very differently. This juvenile remarked that his parents were not responsible and found the parental blaming done by the staff to be "pathetic" (Abrams, 2006, p. 72). The current research will expand on this juvenile's notion by studying parental responsibility from the juvenile's perspective.

## **Research Goals**

Because of the exploratory nature of the current research, our goals were to begin to understand juveniles' attitudes and beliefs about parental responsibility. We wanted to know if those attitudes varied by demographic characteristics (such as race, gender, and age) or by social characteristics. Additionally, the previous research on parental monitoring suggests that the greater the parents' level of involvement reduces the likelihood that a juvenile will commit delinquent acts; therefore, we wanted to determine if those juveniles who reported having more involved and monitoring parents would be less likely to view their parents as responsible for their illegal activities. We expected that most juveniles would say that it would not have made a difference to them if they would have known that their parents could be punished. Based on the evidence from other jurisdictions (Harris, 2006), we also believed that very few parents would have been ordered to do anything as part of their child's disposition.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The initial sample consisted of 149 youths who were participants in the FCB-DTI, a program within the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ). Youths were housed in one of the five grant-funded, moderate, or high-risk residential facilities that delivered faith and community-related services to their clients. Three programs served boys and two served girls. Youths in these programs generally have a chronic history of property offenses or at least one-person offense (DJJ, 2004). To be eligible for the placement in one of the faith and community-based facilities, youths had to fit five initial screening criteria: (a) face commitment to a residential facility, (b) face at least 1 year of DJJ jurisdiction,

(c) have no identified need for clinically based mental health or substance abuse services, (d) have no sex offender designation, and (e) live within 50 miles of a grant-participating facility (DJJ, 2004). If a youth fit these criteria, probation officers or commitment managers were to explain the option of being placed in a facility that offered faith and community-based services. This either occurred before or during a commitment hearing, where youths sat with a commitment manager as well as other relevant parties (e.g., parents, probation officers, and social service agency personnel) to discuss appropriate residential placement. Placement in the FCBDTI facilities was voluntary and required consent from both the parent and the youth to participate in both the programmatic and research components of the grant. The signed informed consent was required before youths could be placed in the facilities.

Based on their observations and interactions with the juveniles, the interviewers rated the reliability of the interview answers. One participant was removed because the interviewer rated her as giving unreliable answers. Another female juvenile was removed because she did not complete the interview. Removing these two participants resulted in a total of 147 juveniles (25 girls and 122 boys). They ranged in age at the time of their interviews from 13 to 18 years ( $M = 15.99$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ). The remaining sample was mostly African American (44%) or White (35%) with Hispanic (not Cuban) and biracial/multiracial juveniles making up 8% and 7%, respectively. The age, gender, and racial composition of the current sample are very similar to that of juveniles in the state of Florida's moderate and high-risk residential facilities (DJJ, 2006).

## Data Collection

Researchers interviewed juveniles face-to-face in private areas of the residential facility where they were housed. The interview took approximately 45 minutes to complete. The interviews covered multiple domains related to background characteristics (e.g., demographics, living and family situation, school experiences, peers, drug use, and crime), experiences with the system, their home communities, religion and religious beliefs, and experiences within the facility. From the larger interview, a small subset of questions was selected for the current research. These questions will be described in detail below and in the tables.

*Demographics.* A number of demographic questions were recorded, including race, age, living arrangements, and marital status of parents.

*School.* Juveniles answered questions concerning their academic performance and other school issues. For the current research, we focus on their school attendance and discipline history.

*Parents' illegal activity.* Juveniles were asked whether their parents (or guardians) had been arrested, on probation, on parole, in jail, or in prison, the year



before the juvenile was committed to their current facility. They were also asked about the illegal drug use of their parents.

*Home life.* Juveniles were asked a series of six questions about what it was usually like around their families. They were asked how often there is a feeling of cooperation, enjoyment in being together, an interest in listening and helping one another, fighting or loud arguments (reversed for scoring), complaining about one another (reversed for scoring), and boredom—nothing happening (reversed for scoring). The answer options were the following: never, sometimes, half the time, usually, and always coded on a 1 to 5 scale (with 1 being never). Three of the questions were reverse coded and the questions were averaged together to give a mean score with a possible range of 1 to 5. The combined scale had a Cronbach's  $\alpha = .83$ .

*Parental responsibility.* Seven questions assessed the juveniles' beliefs and experiences with their parents. Juveniles were asked how involved their parents were and how responsible they thought their parents were for their illegal behavior ("Think back on the crime that led to your most recent arrest, how responsible do you think your parents(s) were for your activities that led to the arrest?"). Interviewers also asked juveniles about their parents' involvement in the court process and if knowing their parents could be punished would have changed their decision to commit a crime.

## Results

### Home and School Lives of the Sample

Table 1 includes summary information about the sample. Approximately 79% of the interviewees reported that they were living with their mom (50.3%), dad (6.8%), both parents (20.4%), or adoptive parents (0.7%) before entering their current juvenile facility. Only 21.8% of the juveniles' natural parents were married at the time of the interview. About one fourth of the juveniles reported running away from home in the year before their current commitment. Fifteen percent indicated that they had been a dependent child (defined as being removed from their parents' home and put in a foster home). More than three quarters of the interviewees indicated that in the year before being committed to their current placement, they had been disciplined at school for behavior problems. Sixty percent were also disciplined for not attending school and almost three quarters were suspended or expelled from school in the year before commitment to their current facility.

Additionally, most juveniles reported that no one was using illegal drugs in their homes. A little less than one third (31%,  $n = 45$ ) of interviewees reported that someone was using illegal drugs where they lived before their current placement. Fifteen percent ( $n = 22$ ) indicated that either or both of their parents used illegal drugs. Juveniles reported that during the year before commitment



**Table 1**  
**Summary Information About the Sample (*n* = 147)**

	Percentage	<i>N</i>
Female	17	25
Male	83	122
African American	43.5	64
White	35.4	52
Hispanic (not Cuban)	8.2	12
Biracial/multiracial	7.5	11
Cuban	1.4	2
All others	4	6
Living with mom before entering juvenile facility	50.3	74
Living with dad before entering juvenile facility	6.8	10
Living with both parents before entering juvenile facility	20.4	30
Living with adoptive parents before entering juvenile facility	0.7	1
Living with some other family member, friend, or other setting	21.8	32
Natural parents married	21.8	32
Natural parents not married	76.9	113
Unsure if parents married	1.4	2
Juvenile reported running away from home in year before commitment	25.9	38
Juvenile reported having a child (one had two children)	10.9	16
Juvenile reported having a child on the way	6.1	9
Juvenile had been a dependent child	15	22
Juvenile suspended or expelled from school in year before commitment	69.4	102

to their current placement, 12% (*n* = 18) had moms who were arrested, 11% (*n* = 17) were in jail, 5% (*n* = 7) were on probation, 1% (*n* = 2) were in prison, and less than 1% (*n* = 1) was on parole. Sixteen percent (*n* = 23) of juveniles reported that their dads had been arrested in the year before their commitment, 10% (*n* = 15) were in prison, 10% (*n* = 14) were in jail, 8% (*n* = 11) were on probation, and 1% (*n* = 2) were on parole.

Overall, the juveniles described home lives that were relatively positive. After reverse coding the three negative oriented questions in the Home Life subscale (e.g. "family fighting or loud arguments"), higher mean scores indicated more desirable home life conditions. On a scale from 1 to 5, our sample had a mean Home Life score of 3.03 (*SD* = 0.53) with a sample range of 1.67 to 5. From the original scale (described above), a 3 would translate into half of the time.

### **Parental Monitoring and Involvement of the Sample**

Juveniles reported parents who were fairly involved in their lives (see Table 2). More than half reported that their parents were "completely involved" in their lives during the year before their commitment. Only 14% indicated that

their parents “never” knew where they were with most saying that their parents knew where they were at least “half of the time.” Three quarters of the juveniles said that their parents were “not at all responsible” for the behavior that led to their arrest and eventual current placement, and approximately 90% indicated that they would have been less likely to commit a crime if they knew their parents would also be punished. Most of the juveniles also felt it was very important for their parents to be with them in court. Almost half of the juveniles indicated that their parents were ordered to do something when the juveniles were sent to their current placement. If they indicated that their parents were ordered to do something, the juveniles were then asked an open-ended question about what their parents were ordered to do. Of the 45% who indicated that their parents were ordered to do something, 34% of those said that their parents were required to pay restitution, 27% were required to pay the court fees, 19% had parents who were required to pay for the cost of their care, and 14% were required to attend counseling. An additional 16% reported that their parents were fined.

### **Demographic Differences and Attitudes Toward Parental Responsibility**

One of the goals of this research was to determine if any demographic differences were related to the parental responsibility questions; however, the vast majority of juveniles believed that their parents were not responsible. Most juveniles also said that knowing their parents might get punished would have made them less likely to commit a crime. Because there was very little variability in the juveniles’ answers, comparisons would not be especially meaningful. Instead, descriptions of the relationship between the responses to these questions and other variables will focus on the trends in the data rather than inferential statistical analyses.

The demographic characteristics of the juveniles did not appear to be related to the juveniles’ opinions concerning their parents’ responsibility. Proportionate numbers of males and females thought their parents were not at all responsible. Similarly, no trends emerged for race or age of the juvenile with regard to notions of their parents’ responsibility. Race, age, and gender also did not appear related to youths’ indicating that they would be less likely to commit a crime if their parents would be punished.

### **Other Characteristics and Attitudes Toward Parental Responsibility**

The juveniles had been in their current residential placement for an average of 147 days ( $SD = 60.5$ ; Median = 136 days) at the time of their interviews. The shortest amount of time was 7 days and the longest was 418 days. While in the facilities, the youth were going through a program focused on character education. Employing a 2-step clustering technique with days in facility and how responsible the juveniles indicated their parents were for their offense, two clusters were formed based on the Schwarz Bayesian Criterion. The first cluster (111

**Table 2**  
**Percent Values (*n*) for Parental Responsibility,  
 Monitoring, and Involvement**

In the year before you were committed to this facility, how involved were your parent(s) in your life?				
<i>Not at all</i>	<i>A little involved</i>	<i>More than a little involved</i>	<i>Completely involved</i>	
4.1% (6)	18.4% (27)	22.4% (33)	54.4% (80)	
During the year before you were committed to this facility, how often did your parents know where you were?				
<i>Never</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Half the time</i>	<i>Usually</i>	<i>Always</i>
14.3% (21)	25.2% (37)	22.4% (33)	23.1% (34)	15% (22)
Think back on the crime that led to your most recent arrest how responsible do you think your parent(s) were for your activities that led to the arrest?				
<i>Not at all responsible</i>	<i>A little responsible</i>	<i>More than a little responsible</i>	<i>Completely responsible</i>	
75.5% (111)	12.2% (18)	4.8% (7)	6.1% (9)	
How important is it to you that your parent(s) are with you when you are in court?				
<i>Not at all important</i>	<i>A little important</i>	<i>Important</i>	<i>Very important</i>	
6.1% (9)	10.9% (16)	16.3% (24)	66% (97)	
If you knew your parent(s) would also be punished for the crimes you commit, do you think that would make you less likely, more likely, or would it make no difference in your choosing to do it?				
<i>Less likely</i>	<i>No difference</i>		<i>More likely</i>	
87.8% (129)	8.2% (12)		1.4% (2)	
Thinking back on the court that ordered you to this institution, did the court order your parent(s) to do anything (such as pay for your care or participate in community service)?				
<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>		<i>Unsure</i>	
42.8% (63)	53.1% (78)		4.1% (6)	
What did the juveniles report the court required their parents do to?				
<i>Restitution</i>	<i>Pay for care</i>	<i>Counseling</i>	<i>Court fees</i>	<i>Fine</i>
15% (22)	8.2% (12)	6.1% (9)	12.2% (18)	8.2% (12)

juveniles) included those juveniles who thought their parents were not at all responsible for their activities that led to their most recent arrest. The second cluster (32 juveniles) included those juveniles who said their parents were a little responsible, more than a little responsible, or completely responsible. Five juveniles had incomplete data on one of these two variables and therefore were not included in the clustering. Based on this clustering, the juveniles who viewed their parents as not at all responsible had been in the facility less time ( $M = 143.5$  days,  $SD = 62.6$ ) than those who said their parents bore some responsibility ( $M = 158.8$  days,  $SD = 53.8$ ), although this was not a significant difference.

Juveniles' own parental status was examined employing this same clustering scheme of juveniles who viewed their parents as not at all responsible or somewhat responsible. Of the 16 juveniles interviewed who had their own children, 13 thought their own parents were not at all responsible for their crimes. Similarly, all 9 juveniles who reported having children on the way said their own parents were not at all responsible. Other than the parental status of the juveniles, juveniles' characteristics from this sample did not appear to influence their views on their parents' responsibility. The 111 juveniles who saw their parents as not at all responsible had ratios proportionate to the sample on the social characteristics such as where the juveniles were living before their commitment, illegal drug use by parents, Home Life scores, school problems, and parental monitoring. In other words, even though the sample was not large enough and the responses not varied enough to statistically assess differences between those juveniles who did not view their parents as responsible and those who viewed their parents as bearing some responsibility, the trends in the sample data did not suggest differences on any of the mentioned demographic or social characteristics.

### **Relationship With Parents Related to Attitudes Toward Parental Responsibility**

The parental monitoring and involvement reported by the juveniles reflected a possible relationship between the juveniles' views on their parents' involvement and their parents' responsibility. Of the only six juveniles who reported that their parents were not at all involved in their lives, four of those indicated that their parents bore some responsibility for their criminal behavior. For the additional levels of involvement (i.e., parents described as a little involved, more than a little involved, and completely involved), most parents were seen as not at all responsible. No trends appeared between the parental monitoring question and the parental responsibility question. Even most of the juveniles who reported parents who were never involved in their lives still saw their parents as not at all responsible for their delinquent actions.

As mentioned, some scholars have hypothesized that juveniles may choose to use these laws as weapons against their parents (Ligorsky, 1994); however, the current sample did not exhibit these tendencies. In fact, only two juveniles said they would have been more likely to commit a crime had they known that their

parents would also be punished for their crimes. Twelve juveniles said it would not have made a difference and 128 juveniles said they would have been less likely to commit. In addition, of the 33 who said their parents bore some responsibility, 24 said that they would have been less likely to commit the crime if they knew their parents would have been punished.

## Discussion

The vast majority of juveniles interviewed said that their parents were not at all responsible for their crimes. Most also said knowing their parents might be punished would decrease their likelihood of committing a crime. These juveniles did not have ideal home or school backgrounds, with many of them reporting that they had run away from home and most of them reported being disciplined at school. Nonetheless, their demographic and social characteristics did not appear to influence their attitudes toward their parents' responsibility. This apparent incongruence might be the result of the juveniles' current placement and the messages the youth are getting from the counselors to take responsibility for their actions. It is also possible that the juveniles take more personal responsibility for their actions because they have had very little positive direction from their parents. To an outside observer, that might seem like the exact reason why the juveniles would be more likely to blame their parents; however, to a juvenile entrenched in a dysfunctional home, the rarity of parental interaction might be the exact reason why the juveniles do not blame their parents.

Many of the juveniles indicated that their parents were involved in their lives during the year before they were committed and their parents knew where they were. Even the juveniles who reported that they had been a dependent child at some point reported that their parents knew where they were at about the same rates as juveniles who had not been dependent. Parental involvement may have resulted because of one of three reasons: (a) the parents became more involved in response to their child's trouble with the law, (b) parental involvement by itself is not necessarily relevant to avoiding criminal behavior, or (c) the children perceived their parents as involved even though they were not as much as they needed to be. If it means the first option that the parent got involved once the juveniles started having legal problems, it may be that their involvement was too late. According to Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990), the parents should be involved and supervising when the children are young to avoid low self-control and delinquency. In other words, laws that force parents to be involved may be too little, too late. If the parents were involved all along and the children still broke the law (the second option), then it may be that although parental monitoring is important, it is not enough to keep a juvenile out of legal trouble. The third option is that the juveniles do not know what appropriate parental monitoring looks like. They answered that their parents knew where they were, but the parents may not have known what their children were doing or had input with their children about what they were doing.

Contrary to the hypothesis, almost half of the juveniles indicated that their parents were required to do something as part of the juvenile's disposition that included community service, restitution, counseling, and paying for the cost of care. Several of the juveniles interviewed reported that their parents were fined; however, a fine is not a viable option under the current Florida statutes. Most likely, the juveniles mistakenly used the term "fine" to mean an order of paying for their cost of care or an order to pay restitution.

Juveniles in the current sample did not express a desire to manipulate the system so that their parents would be sanctioned. Contrary to the belief that juveniles might choose to commit crimes so they can effectively punish their parents, a vast majority of the juveniles in the current sample indicated that they would be less likely to commit a crime if they knew their parents were going to be punished. Even juveniles who had less than ideal home lives expressed that they would be less likely to commit a crime if they knew their parents would be punished.

The current study was limited by the length of time the juveniles had been in the facility at the time of their interviews. Some juveniles had only been in the facility for a few weeks, whereas others had been there for more than a year. Ideally, the juveniles would have been interviewed as they first arrived at the facility and before they received any of the character training or other instructions that were part of the placement. Additionally, the juveniles were all part of the same kind of program and their participation in that program may have influenced their responses. To counter both of these limitations, length of time in the placement did not appear to have an effect on attitudes toward the parental responsibility issues. If the placement or the programs being taught in that placement were influencing the juveniles' responses, then the length of time in that placement should have produced differences in the sample, but it did not.

Hindsight bias is certainly another limitation with the current interviews. Asking juveniles to consider possible parental punishments and its influence on their criminal behaviors could have been influenced by the juveniles' current situations. It is possible that the juveniles would have said that any number of factors would have made them less likely to commit crimes.

Some may hesitate in placing much emphasis on the opinions of juveniles, specifically juvenile delinquents. In fact, the opinions of this group are rarely considered (Lane et al., 2002), but that could be one of the problems of the system. The juvenile justice system was intended to rehabilitate and help the children and families who find themselves within its purview. When these individuals' opinions are ignored, the very essence of the system's purpose is neglected. Even with the self-report and hindsight bias difficulties in the current research, only a juvenile, specifically a juvenile delinquent, can provide the unique perspective about different sanctions and whether they believe them to be effective or ineffective. Self-reflection by juveniles is certainly not the absolute answer to curbing delinquent behavior, but it provides a relatively unexplored piece of the puzzle that could help.

## Conclusion

Juveniles in the current juvenile justice system are treated in a way that emphasizes personal responsibility and rational actions, but parental responsibility laws redirect some of the accountability on to the parents of the juvenile offenders. Nonetheless, most of the juveniles interviewed in the current study indicated that they did not believe their parents were responsible for their crimes. The juveniles' responses provide a new insight and perspective on the national trend to expand parental responsibility legislation. Despite the limitations of self-report and the limited sample size, the current study is a first attempt to explore what juveniles believe about parental responsibility, and their perspective is one that should be given at least some credence in terms of the policy implications for parental responsibility laws.

The juveniles' answers indicated that most of them did not think their parents were responsible for their delinquent behaviors. This means that if the state or city is punishing the parents, this may be sending an inconsistent and confusing message to the juveniles. Those surveyed overwhelmingly did not view their parents as responsible for their actions, yet parents can be included in their child's disposition. Lawmakers should question what message this sends to the juveniles about personal accountability. If the juveniles are correct in their assessments and the parents are not responsible for preventing juveniles' criminal behaviors, then these laws are symbolic rather than addressing the true issue. In fact, there is the possibility that the laws make life more difficult because parents who are living in poverty or low income situations will likely have a more difficult time complying with the terms of the parental involvement (e.g., financial requirements).

The juveniles also overwhelmingly said that knowing their parents would have been punished would have kept them from committing their crimes. The juveniles seem to be saying that they would have been deterred because of this knowledge, yet would they have answered the same way had we asked them about knowing that they themselves would be punished? In other words, is there more of a deterrent effect with the risk of their parents being punished rather than the risk of getting punished themselves? If sanctions against their parents truly are a better deterrent than sanctions against themselves, then the juveniles should be taught about these laws and made aware of the possible ramifications.

Clearly, the findings from the current study bring forward more questions than answers related to parental responsibility policies. The juveniles' responses confirm the need for more in-depth investigations of these laws. Most importantly, research needs to be conducted to determine the effects and effectiveness of these laws, paying particular attention to any unintended and detrimental consequences for the parents, the family, or the juvenile.



## References

- Abrams, L. S. (2006). Listening to juvenile offenders: Can residential treatment prevent recidivism? *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 23, 61-85.
- Applegate, B. K., Cullen, F. T., Turner, M. G., & Sundt, J. L. (1996). Assessing public support for three strikes-and-you're-out laws: Global versus specific attitudes. *Crime & Delinquency*, 42, 517-534.
- Barnow, S., Lucht, M., & Freyberger, H. J. (2005). Correlates of aggressive and delinquent conduct problems in adolescence. *Aggressive Behavior*, 31, 24-39.
- Brank, E. M., Hays, S. A., & Weisz, V. (2006). All parents are to blame (except this one): Global versus specific attitudes related to parental responsibility laws. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 36, 2,670-2,684.
- Brank, E. M., Kucera, S. C., & Hays, S. A. (2005). Parental responsibility statutes: An organization and policy implications. *Journal of Law and Family Studies*, 7(1), 1-55.
- Brank, E. M., & Weisz, V. (2004). Paying for the crimes of their children: Public support of parental responsibility. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 32, 465-475.
- Browning, K., & Loeber, R. (1999). Highlights of findings from the Pittsburgh youth study. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Fact Sheet, No. 95.
- Cahn, N. R. (1996). Pragmatic questions about parental liability statutes. *Wisconsin Law Review*, 1996, 399-445.
- Caprara, G. V., Scabini, E., Barbaranelli, C., Pastorelli, C., Regalia, C., & Bandura, A. (1998). Impact of adolescents' perceived self-regulatory efficacy on familial communication and antisocial conduct. *European Psychologist*, 3, 125-132.
- Clark, R. D., & Shields, G. (1997). Family communication and delinquency. *Adolescence*, 32(125), 81-92. Conger, K. J., & Conger, R. D. (1994). Differential parenting change in sibling differences in delinquency. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 8, 287-302.
- Davidson, H. (1995). No consequences—re-examining parental responsibility laws. *Stanford Law and Policy Review*, 7, 23-29.
- Florida Department of Juvenile Justice. (2004). Faith and community-based delinquency treatment initiative: The Florida model. Retrieved October 30, 2007, from <http://www.djj.state.fl.us/faith/index.html>
- Florida Department of Juvenile Justice. (2006). Comprehensive accountability report: Outcome evaluation, quality assurance program accountability measures. Retrieved October 30, 2007, from <http://www.djj.state.fl.us/OPA/CAR2006.html>
- Gottfredson, M. R., & Hirschi, T. (1990). *A General Theory of Crime*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Guo, J., Hawkins, J. D., Hill, K. G., & Abbott, R. D. (2001). Childhood and adolescent predictors of alcohol abuse and dependence in young adulthood. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, 62, 754-762.
- Harris, L. J. (2006). An empirical study of parental responsibility laws: Sending messages, but what kind and to whom? *Utah Law Review*, 2006, 5-34.
- Jacksonville City Ordinance. (2006). An ordinance regarding curfews for minors or children. Ordinance 2006-889.
- Laird, R. D., Pettit, G. S., Bates, J. E., & Dodge, K. A. (2003). Parents' monitoring-relevant knowledge and adolescents' delinquent behavior: Evidence of correlated developmental changes and reciprocal influences. *Child Development*, 74, 752-768.
- Lane, J., Lanza-Kaduce, L., Frazier, C. E., & Bishop, D. M. (2002). Adult versus juvenile sanctions: Voices of incarcerated youth. *Crime & Delinquency*, 48, 431-455.
- Laskin, E. R. (2000). How parental liability statutes criminalize and stigmatize minority mothers. *American Criminal Law Review*, 37, 1,195-1,217.

- Ligorsky, S. A. (1994). Williams v. Garcetti: Constitutional defects in California's "gang-parent" liability statute. *Loyola of Los Angeles Law Review*, 28, 447-472.
- Moon, M. M., Wright, J. P., Cullen, F. T., & Pealer, J. A. (2000). Putting kids to death: Specifying public support for juvenile capital punishment. *Justice Quarterly*, 17, 663-684.
- Nagin, D. S. (1998). Criminal deterrence research at the outset of the twenty-first century. *Crime and Justice: An Annual Review of Research*, 23, 1-42.
- Patterson, G. R., & Stouthamer-Loeber, M. (1984). The correlation of family management practices and delinquency. *Child Development*, 55, 1,299-1,307.
- Powers of the Court Over Parent or Guardian at Disposition. (2007). Florida Statute 47 § 985.513.
- Powers With Respect to Certain Children. Florida Statute 47 § 985.512 (Lexis-Nexis, 2007).
- Public Agenda Online. (1999). Kids these days. Retrieved February 20, 2004, from <http://www.publicagenda.org/specials/kids/kids3d.htm>
- Simourd, L., & Andrews, D. (1994). Correlates of delinquency: A look at gender differences. *Forum on Corrections Research*, 6(1), 26-31.
- Smith, C., & Thornberry, T. P. (1995). The relationship between childhood maltreatment and adolescent involvement in delinquency. *Criminology*, 33, 451-481.
- Snyder, H. N., & Sickmund, M. (2006). Juvenile offenders and victims: 2006 National Report. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.
- Thornberry, T. P. (1994). Violent families and youth violence. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Fact Sheet, No. 21.
- USA Today/CNN/Gallup Poll. (1999). On the Colorado school shootings. Retrieved October 30, 2007, from <http://www.usatoday.com/news/poll016.htm>
- Warr, M. (2005). Making delinquent friends: Adult supervision and children's affiliations. *Criminology*, 43, 77-105.
- Widom, C. S. (1989). The cycle of violence. *Science*, 244, 160-166.
- Zingraff, M. T., Leiter, J., Myers, K. A., & Johnson, M. C. (1993). Child maltreatment and youthful problem behavior. *Criminology*, 31, 173-202.

Eve M. Brank (JD, University of Nebraska, Lincoln; PhD, Social Psychology, University of Nebraska, Lincoln) was an assistant professor in the Department of Criminology, Law and Society at the University of Florida. Her research focuses primarily on families, juveniles, and especially parental responsibility laws.

Jodi Lane (PhD, social ecology with concentration in criminology, Law and Society, University of California, Irvine) is an associate professor in the Department of Criminology, Law and Society at the University of Florida. Her interests include fear of crime, juvenile justice policy, corrections, and evaluation research. Her work has also appeared in *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, *Deviant Behavior*, *Justice Quarterly*, and *Law & Society Review*.